

Short Story 217*: A Visit From His Confidant

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Marc Aramini — 22 Apr 2015, 16:21

#A VISIT FROM HIS CONFIDANT

"A Visit From His Confidant" appeared in the *Readercon 22* convention booklet in 2011. Mark Twain was the memorial guest of honor.

##SUMMARY:

The narrator awakens in a different room than the one in which he went to sleep, dressed in a smoking jacket and finding himself in a library much more sparsely filled than his own. Soon he notices what he takes to be a floating brown caterpillar, which greets him in dialect. The narrator soon recognizes it as Mark Twain's talking mustache. The mustache acknowledges its primary reason for coming to see our speaker is the mustache on his own face (thus, of course, we have our narrator as Gene Wolfe). In their conversation, Wolfe is categorized as neither a brave nor entirely good man, but a reliable one no worse than most men. He admits he won't be attending Readercon in Boston because of his wife, but the mustache cuts him off and says "We don't speak of ?em here. ?No" is good enough for us, an? what's more n? good enough is over much. You're not goin?, an? that's settled. Or else you are, an that's better. Mark's goin?,too. You tell "em Mark's a reader." Wolfe balks, insisting that Twain is a great writer, but the mustache insists he read much more than he wrote. The topic of the book Joan of Arc comes up, and Wolfe asserts Twain thought it his best.

The mustache insists it is talking of an older manuscript which Twain read and lost, then, inspired by it, determined to write a better one when he had the chance. The mustache further insists that Twain learned not only through doing, but by reading stacks of books to achieve understanding. Wolfe asserts that he must have read a lot of Cooper to write "Fennimore Cooper's Literary Offenses."

They then move on to discuss Twain's defense of Harriet Shelley, with Wolfe playing devil's advocate for Pierce Shelley, saying that certainly his unconventional views towards marriage should have been considered. The mustache then dismantles moral relativism by asking Wolfe if Wolfe's bicycle was ever stolen, and if his lack of precautions justified the theft, then draws the same situation forward to his car.

Twain's mustache then says that Twain lost a wife and a daughter, and it made him bitter, but ultimately sympathetic to women like Joan of Arc and Harriet Shelley. Wolfe says he will tell the fans at Readercon that "Mark Twain was a wise man and a learned man. Better than both, he was a man who thought. Men who think go wrong at times. Men who don't, never go wrong because they don't go at all."

The mustache condemns them as going wrong anyways. He concludes by saying Twain only had a grammar school education and read because he was apprenticed to a printer. Wolfe assures the mustache that he can be relied upon to relate all of these facts.

##COMMENTARY:

As a short write up for Readercon 22 which featured Mark Twain as a memorial guest of honor, it seems that Wolfe wants to highlight a few of Twain's more serious but less well-known literary efforts. He acknowledges the research and dedication Twain brought to his rather uncharacteristic late in life work on Joan of Arc, which Twain regarded as his best, even though it has been subject to very mixed critical reviews. The emphasis on Twain as a reader, as a serious critic, and as a literary historian dedicated to research who acquired his love for reading through a printing apprenticeship is unambiguously Wolfe's main point. He selects less well known features, eschewing mention of Twain's time on a steamboat or his comic novels and instead opting to explore his critical position and his historical writing. Wolfe's other purpose is of course a rather didactic excoriation of modernity, with barbs criticizing modern education, implying that the apprenticeship to a printer and simply thinking is ultimately more productive than higher education might be. (Wolfe jokes that grammar schools are no longer so called because they do not in fact teach grammar there, etc.)

The works mentioned by the mustache include the dismantling of James Fennimore Cooper, which, after setting forth how Cooper violated 18 of the 19 or 22 rules of literary art governing romantic fiction, concludes with this gem:

I may be mistaken, but it does seem to me that "Deerslayer" is not a work of art in any sense; it does seem to me that it is destitute of every detail that goes to the making of a work of art; in truth, it seems to me that "Deerslayer" is just simply a literary delirium tremens.

A work of art? It has no invention; it has no order, system, sequence, or result; it has no lifelikeness, no thrill, no stir, no seeming of reality;

its characters are confusedly drawn, and by their acts and words they prove that they are not the sort of people the author claims that they are; its humor is pathetic; its pathos is funny; its conversations are -- oh! indescribable; its love-scenes odious; its English a crime against the language.

Counting these out, what is left is Art. I think we must all admit that.

(Twain)

While this is a light piece, it definitely resonates with some of Harold Bloom's ideas of misprision: Twain reads a book on Joan of Arc that obsesses him so much that he must struggle with it, do his own research, and create a different final product. Bloom usually characterizes this process as creative misprision. It seems Wolfe went through much the same developmental pattern with Jack Vance's **Dying Earth** series and **The Book of the New Sun**.

Wolfe (as writer) also casts some barbs at moral relativism, insinuating that some truths and rights are universal, and further implies, using Twain's mustache as his mouthpiece, that Twain's criticism of Shelley for abandoning his first wife were justified, though perhaps steeped in likeable rhetoric serving to ingratiate his audience. In the final analysis the portrait, while lighthearted, paints Twain as a serious reader. The ironic distance between Wolfe defending Shelley and the mustache defeating him so easily in an argument is typical of the ironic distance between the narrator's position and Wolfe the writer's stance, similarly separated from the Gene Wolfe character just as it was in "The Last Thrilling Wonder Story."

##CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

Much as his earlier critiques of the established educational system, such as his introduction to

Endangered Species as well as his foray into fictionalizing scholars such as "Civis Laputus Sum" and "Morning Glory", this one highlights the more important status of readers and writers. The off screen implication of Rosemary's health problems and the silence the mustache invokes are probably as close as Wolfe can come in a pseudo-fiction to a real life exploration of the effect of caring for someone with Alzheimers . The stance, as in his more typical fictional efforts, is once again "enough said". The concept that it is better to have a wrong opinion and express that belief than to have none at all and do nothing seems to be an apologia for Twain and perhaps for many modern figures as well.

Just as in "Redbeard", the rather traditional morality espoused by the narrative is set contrary to the Gene Wolfe surrogate, our narrators in each story. This ironic tone is here set up by the mustache's superior rhetoric. This distance between the "correct" ethical attitude and the narrator's viewpoint is a hallmark of Wolfe throughout his entire career, but we can often still determine the "triumphant" side. In his most complex works, Wolfe gives the adversarial position an extremely compelling argument (as is the case when Thecla discusses the impossible promise of religion: that a compassionate God would forgive everything when the chance for a choice existed and refuse to act within Creation, but damn forever once life is past and suddenly exert an ultimate, irreversible influence on cosmology).